



Rona Pondick, *Beds* (detail), 1988. Installation view.

RONA PONDICK

THE SCULPTURE CENTER

In the opening lines of Georges Bataille's unnerving essay "The Solar Anus," he writes, "It is clear that the world is purely parodic, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in deceptive form." To illustrate his notion of parody, he draws a parallel between the sun and darkness, the mind and anus, describing the intellect as "an erotic force, up from the ape's provocative anus to the erect human's head and brain." Bataille's "parody" applies, in structure as well as conception, to Rona Pondick's unsettling installation, *Beds*. In a sequence of three rooms which recede into the depths of the gallery, Pondick installed three different bed formations. In each one, a parodic episode ensues which simultaneously venerates taboos and denigrates the sacred.

The first room is bathed in light. A bed of long pillows is propped up at one end by a block of rough-hewn wood. Upon the pillows' pristine surface rests a long, stiff form wrapped in white gauze. This serves as an introduction to a recurring motif used by Pondick throughout the installation—variations on elongated shafts resting upon bedding. Moving deeper into the building's dark, windowless interior, one finds three rows of sandbags layered to form long horizontal wedges and over which sheets of lead have been unrolled. Toward the head of each row, the malleable lead conforms tightly to each sandbag's rounded surface. As the lead sheets continue their downward extension, they cease to follow the sandbags' scalloped configuration and return to their stiffer, original form. This irregular indentation implies that a large, heavy body once lay there. Now, however, only the impression of its absent form remains and, in its stead, three brown waxen odorless effigies of turds.

The composed organization of the three beds, and the columnar formation of these turds upon a single satin pillow, imply a social dimension less akin to the cultural (i.e. esthetics) and more akin to the

cultured (i.e. propriety). Here we see Bataille's parodic juxtapositions working in full force. The brown waxen forms, which one unavoidably associates with fecal matter, have been elevated in status. Their placement upon a pillow triggers our association with ritualized events such as weddings and monarchical coronations, where jewels are ceremoniously presented. Pondick has raised excrement to a level of adoration and, in so doing, violates the standards of aggrandized presentational formats. Pondick's excremental fantasies continue in the final room, where two stacks of brownish-black pillows are piled up in a dark niche. Between them, a hairy fecal form protrudes like the head of a furry snake. At this point, one is no longer surprised by another repulsive, fecal form. In fact, one's passage through this installation is an odyssey in desensitization toward cultural taboos.

One's passage through the installation's dimly lit depths is akin to a journey into the bowels of Herman Melville's archetypal whale. In his description of the search for a perfume base in the animal's innards, Melville notes the paradoxical nature of the process: "Now that the incorruption of this most fragrant ambergris should be found in the heart of such decay; is this nothing? Bethink thee of that saying of St. Paul in Corinthians, about corruption and incorruption; how we are sown in dishonor, but raised in glory." Each bed's parodic duality, as it approaches familiarity and eventual acceptability, realizes Bataille's substitution of the Western symbols for order, the sun and eye, with the night and anus. This reversal, although jarring, forces a dispersion of cultural codes and a more physical basis for veneration. Pondick, too, asks that rationality be redefined; rather than sublimating humanity's anal obsession, one is asked to accept it.

—Kirby Gookin